
Mogens Klitgaard

**There's a Man
Sitting on a
Trolley**

Translated and
with an Introduction and Notes
by Marc Linder

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First Chapter

I

One damp Copenhagen January morning a truck drove up in front of a smallish dry-goods store in the old part of the city. The gray daylight had as yet barely been able to disperse the heavy, wet darkness in the slushy street. People don't have much interest in their neighbor's business on such a morning, and the moving of the little shop's inventory and some poor furniture didn't attract much attention. The movers' ponderous, rough figures struggled in the semi-darkness with boxes and tied-up down quilts; a woman came out of the narrow shop door with a few poor potted plants in her arms.—

Late in the morning it began to rain. A man came and stuck a sign on the shop window: For rent.

It had to be the bad times that were to blame. Month after month sales had dropped. Lundegaard had fought like hell to keep it going; he wasn't the man to give up at the first difficulty—he'd taken goods on credit, he'd borrowed from his family, he'd tried to do clearance sales, and he'd had the printer print up many thousands of fliers, which his son had distributed in the neighborhood—but everything had been in vain. There were more and more bills and fewer and fewer customers.

Life for the Lundegaard family the last few years had been hell, backbreaking and futile work, and a return so scanty that they could barely keep body and soul together. Since his son Poul had finished his apprenticeship, he'd been unemployed most of the time. His daughter Anna was doing better: she'd gotten work in a department store at a salary that at least covered

the bulk of her modest consumption.

Toil and drudgery, filth and poverty had been the main content of their lives during these years. And then even so their struggle had been in vain. In the end they'd hoped that Christmas sales would save them.

One gray January morning their poor possessions were driven to a rear-tenement apartment on a side street in Vesterbro.

January is a bleak month in Copenhagen, but it's hell in a Vesterbro slum. People are freezing and hungry, the atmosphere hangs heavy and damp over the filthy houses, even the rats don't thrive—only the ministers seem to manage amazingly well in this part of town. There's no lack of slum work, and the laborers in the Lord's vineyard don't neglect the earthly for the spiritual needs. Isn't it written that you have to make the most of your talents. Our Lord looks with mercy on the minister's duties.

Religion is the opium of the people. Mrs. Lundegaard was in need of opium. Every Friday God's friends met in the Nazarenes' parish hall and cried over the sins of men. She, who'd had a healthy and practical temperament, had totally collapsed when the business had to be given up.

When she married Lundegaard 25 years ago, they were good, well-off, middle-class people. The business went well and they had two healthy and beautiful children. Back then they'd dreamt beautiful dreams of business expansions, a wholesale merchant's license, and maybe a pretty little house someplace outside the city with a lawn and flagpole. They'd been capable and energetic, probably happy too, even though they didn't realize it till now after the fact, and in the evening, while the children were sleeping, they'd taken out their bank book and were pleased with the growth of its contents, and it was in these late hours that their imagination had built their beautiful dreams.

Nothing ever came of a villa, but they certainly did get a little summer house which they biked out to in the evening after the store had been closed and the day's accounts made up.

It may well have been the war that was the setting for their economic success and produced the beautiful promises, because

little by little as the years after the world war passed, the good times quieted down.

Things really couldn't ever get that bad; they belonged to a good bourgeois family, which was simply well off. Lundegaard was of the opinion that the poor sales were a phase, and, thank god, you of course had a little to fall back on.

But sales never recovered. They kept dropping, and as the months went by, the difficulties piled up. — It's the crisis, Lundegaard said and read aloud from the newspaper about the many small businesses that had to close. The children were grown up now, but the difficult times gave them a bad start in life. The summer house had to be sold, the bicycles had to be sold, and the family had to be content with little excursions to the surrounding area of the city.

Incidentally, the desire for amusements and excursions gradually disappeared on its own. Lundegaard lay awake at night speculating. He became nervous and testy, got black circles under his eyes, and sought to deaden his anxiety about the future with liquid stimulants.

For the children it was actually a relief when the collapse came. Anna's salary exactly covered the rent for the little apartment in the rear tenement, Poul had his jobless benefits, and if Lundegaard could get a little bill-collecting work or something like that, they could probably keep the worst distress from their door.

It turned out, however, that it wasn't so easy to get work of that kind: A bond was required—but eventually it looked as though it was going to work out. Lundegaard's brother and brother-in-law, after many misgivings, got the required money together, and on the same occasion you heard that things weren't going well for them either. Lundegaard's brother was a senior bank clerk, his brother-in-law a civil servant. Their salaries had been cut back, and then of course on top of that came inflation, which made the prices of consumer goods rise so the money only went a little way.

II

The winter days moved at a snail's pace through slush and cold for those who spent their drab existence at the bottom of the grimy stone shaft in Vesterbro's slum quarter.

Every day Lundegaard set off for his wearisome collection work. Up staircases and down staircases. The doors were slammed and he collected more curses than money. His wife conducted a heroic struggle to preserve the family's middle-class stamp. She scoured and washed the damp little rooms, patched, mended, and brushed the worn-out clothes. The children spent time at home only when they slept. Anna had gotten herself a boy friend and Poul spent the evenings in the passageway with those his own age.

One day Lundegaard was busily on the go around town and had come by their old store. It was already rented out again and was now a florist shop. He hadn't been able to help pumping people on the street. They informed him that the flower business didn't really appear to be going anywhere and that the new proprietor apparently had already begun to be in difficulties. He was said to be a gardener's assistant who'd gotten tired of going around and slaving for other people and had tried his luck with the few pennies he'd been able to set aside from his wages, but it surely wasn't exactly luck that he wound up having; in any event, the former gardener's assistant stood for hours in the window staring in a melancholy way out at the street, and there were exceedingly few customers who could be enticed by the modest window display. But at bottom he certainly had to be an optimist, the gardener, because he'd gotten married on the strength of the business's future, and as far as you could see, his wife was expecting a baby soon. — What's more, if all it took were toil and drudgery, then things would really be all right: the gardener went to the market square every morning, and he kept the shop clean and nice and arranged the flowers very beautifully in the little window, but after all, who could afford to buy flowers in these times.

Lundegaard was consoled a bit, as it were, by the fact that

his successor wasn't having any more luck with the premises than he himself had had. So then it was after all the premises and the times that were to blame and not Lundegaard's incompetence as a businessman.

It was therefore with badly disguised glee that he told his wife how things stood with their old store. But his wife didn't like being reminded of their earlier life as shopkeepers. Those beautiful visions, the summer house, the title of wholesale merchant, the lawn and the arbor with hollyhocks, the whole paradise lost once again stood before her inner gaze, dimmed her eyes, and gave her a lump in her throat.

"There, there," Lundegaard comforted her. "I mean we never really got that far along."

"But we did have a business and money in the bank," she cried. "What do we have now."

The poor bill collector didn't know what to say or do. He awkwardly stroked her hair and expressed the opinion that, after all, things might improve yet.

But he himself surely didn't mean that. In his heart of hearts. They'd slaved and toiled for the realization of their dreams, and their vitality had surely been thrown in for good measure. Now they were, after all, both at the half-century mark, so where it would come from wasn't easy to see.

He turned quite melancholy, Lundegaard did. Not until now did their misfortune stand so clearly before him. The move, the fitting up of the hole-in-the-wall rooms here in the rear tenement, and the trouble getting work had pre-empted his thoughts, and his consciousness of the fact that it was the very destruction of their life's destiny that they were experiencing did not reach him until now.

Yes, it was true. They couldn't expect any more from life now than the struggle against poverty and filth. A dull urge to protest awakened in him. How had they deserved such a fate. Hadn't they been honest and energetic people. Hadn't they in a life of labor and toil deserved a tranquil old age. Was the world then bewitched. Now he had to run up and down the stairs to earn his bread. A quiet, gnawing indignation was forcing its way

in the otherwise so peaceable and sociable Lundegaard. The department stores were stealing the trade from honest people and taking their children into their employ for 40 crowns a month. The department stores were able to do it. They expanded and expanded, while one little shop after another had to close and their proprietors could go their way, wherever they pleased—if in fact they hadn't resisted for such a long time that Sundholm was the only place open to them.

III

It was a perfectly ordinary Copenhagen January day. Slush, dampness, fog. The thermometer on the Custom House fluctuated between 3 and 4 degrees centigrade, pork rose 4 *øre* per kilogram, the newspaper dealer had turned blue with numbness from the cold in his wooden stand, and the parks' paths were covered with a coating of white, which turned to water wherever you set foot. The stock exchange reported a brisk atmosphere for bonds and stable share prices, and in Østerbro there was a little cigar dealer who gassed himself. From weariness with life and because his business was going badly.

It was late in the afternoon. Mrs. Lundegaard had had to turn on the light to be able to see: even in the middle of the day it was half-dark in the small rooms. Of course, you should save on the light, but there was so much that had to be done. Patched and darned. Once in a while she had to go out into the kitchen and look after the food.

By 6 o'clock she'd set the table. Anna had come home and was sitting by the window sewing up a silk stocking. It seemed to Mrs. Lundegaard that she'd begun to use so much make-up recently. Of course it also cost money. Neither of them said anything. Each of them lived her own life. But there was of course that business with the money. It was hard to get the household money to go round, the food first and foremost had to be nourishing, and it was a pity for the girl, who brought home almost all her wages, perpetually to have this dull warm lunch

and the humble sandwiches, which in a way displayed the poverty of her home to her coworkers at the department store. Mrs. Lundegaard thought she'd make a bit more out of Anna's sandwiches. But there was of course that business with the money. Maybe she could earn a little sewing. The greengrocer's wife had said that one of the big ready-to-wear clothing shops on Vesterbro Street was looking for home sewers. Her eyes, of course, weren't so good any more, but she could get herself glasses. It probably wouldn't be that expensive—after all, the health insurance fund would pay some of it.

Poul had come and was rummaging around in something in the bedroom, but Lundegaard still hadn't come.

At half past six he still hadn't come.

Mrs. Lundegaard looked at her daughter anxiously. Anna couldn't stand to eat late. She always had to leave again just when they'd eaten. Poul didn't care when they ate—he surely didn't seem to care about anything. It would probably be better for them to begin, then Lundegaard would doubtless come in the meantime.

They ate in silence. When they'd finished and the table had been cleared, he still hadn't come.

— — Lundegaard didn't come home till far into the night. He was drunk. She'd never seen him like that before. His clothing was dirty and he blathered on incessantly.

Lundegaard awoke during the night and was intent on being violent to her. She cried and those religious thoughts arose in her once more. A life in purity and beauty, in spite of poverty. God and self-discipline might help. They'd lived a worldly life—this was their punishment. A husband who drank and was lecherous, a man of his age, a daughter who was never home, and a son who'd become a stranger to his mother.

IV

“As far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't have a damned thing against it if war came, the sooner the better,” Nielsen said,

protruding his lower lip, as he was wont to do when he meant to emphasize his masculine strength. "It might clear the air, I mean everything's so confounded anyway that it couldn't get worse."

"Somebody'd have to be an idiot to say something like that," Poul said. Nielsen was an unemployed office worker and lived as a boarder in the front building. They were hanging around the passageway

"Maybe," Nielsen said, "or desperate. Well, I look at the question from my own perspective, based on what concerns me. I gladly leave the rest to others. I think that's a nice little way you have of examining things, but it irritates me a little bit. The whole time you keep saying we and us. There's nobody who'll raise a hand to help you unless there's an advantage in doing so. — And as far as I'm concerned, let things just happen, I don't care—they couldn't get worse. I've been unemployed now for 8 months, I owe money left and right, I get summonses from the sheriff, I sit at the welfare office every other day and wait for 4-5 hours. The landlady here in the boarding house, who was so lovable while I had work, is now trying to provoke me into being insolent so she can give me notice. And she's right to do that—she can't pay her rent with my excuses. When you meet some of your old acquaintances on the street, you've hardly managed to say hello to them before they say: Well, old boy, I've got to get going. When I'd been unemployed for 5 months, my fiancée broke it off. Which I can well understand with all my heart: it was totally senseless for a girl like her to be engaged to an unemployed office worker who isn't even in a labor union because his friends didn't think it was fashionable back then when he had work. And even if I'd been such a lucky dog that I'd gone and gotten something to do, so what—you know what a man working in an office earns. If you're working all the time and maybe even have a chance to asskiss your way forward, or elbow your way forward, then maybe it might work out, but once you're 29 years old and have been unemployed for 8 months, then it's abysmal, hopeless. No, just let that damned war come—it might well be able to clear the air one way or another. In any case, it'll be a change. That's something anyway."

Poul went with Nielsen up to his room. Nielsen went out into the kitchen to the landlady to procure two cups of coffee. Poul looked around the room. If nothing else could put you in a gloomy mood, in any case the room certainly could. If you looked out the window, you saw a cement yard with truck garages, trash cans and a pissoir; the rear tenement was situated across the courtyard where he himself lived, and an electroplating plant was located on the right. God knows how many different people had lived in this room over the course of time. Three different pictures of the king of Rome and a photograph of a hotel in Hjørring were hanging on the wall. In one corner stood a washstand that was painted green with a wash basin and an enamel pitcher; Nielsen's razor, comb, toothbrush, etc. lay on the shelf above. It wasn't so strange that Nielsen preferred standing down in the passageway.

When Nielsen returned with the coffee, they sat down to talk about girls. But almost as if they were something bygone or something that lay a good ways in the future. Nielsen showed him photographs from the time when he had work and went on excursions with his fiancée. Poul had seen the pictures before, but looked at them again out of politeness. It was as if Nielsen didn't own anything except a couple of amateur pictures of a girl who was sitting on a grassy cliff in the woods and squinting into the sun or lying in a bathing suit on Solrød beach. There was also a somewhat older picture of a soccer team Nielsen had once been on: Nielsen was No. 3 from the left and marked with a little cross.

The sound from a radio in the rear tenement came through—it was playing the song about Larsen.

“We're brought up to be considerate and modest,” Nielsen said. “That's what's destroying our existence. We have to be ruthless, cynical, and cold-hearted. In a city like Copenhagen there are plenty of opportunities if you're just not so naive to go around waiting for them to come on their own. You can't line up nicely and wait your turn; you can't give a damn about rules and morality—instead you have to use your head. Morality is made by those who want to keep the opportunities for themselves.”

Poul didn't say anything. In general he said very little. He made sure he reported at the unemployment office, made sure to be home at mealtimes, sat for hours over a cup of coffee without anything with it in the ice-cream parlor around the corner, or stood and hung out in the passageway.

V

Lundegaard was a little washed-out after the previous evening's events. He sat and looked out the window and didn't really know how to deal with the situation. Whether he should be distant or contrite. It wasn't that simple. He had in fact spent some of the money he'd collected. Besides, whichever way he turned, he ran into tough times; the gas bill from the business still hadn't been paid. They'd gotten an extension on that as on so much else. But what was the point of an extension—after all, things wouldn't ever get any better.

Mrs. Lundegaard didn't talk at all about what had happened the day before. She said something about perhaps being able to get some work as a home seamstress. They talked a little about it, but they realized that they'd then have to buy a treadle sewing machine on installments—after all, the old hand machine wouldn't be any use. Lundegaard thought that if a loan of a few hundred crowns could be procured, they could put a stop to all their worries at one time. And then maybe they'd get beyond it, and things would be able to run smoothly.

Lundegaard knew that such a loan could probably be procured. Maybe with the furniture as security or with the guarantee his brother and brother-in-law had given. Naturally not at a bank—banks didn't get involved in something like that. Lundegaard knew the address of a moneylender. Of course the whole city knows where the moneylenders and abortionists live. Copenhagen's misery has its own advertiser newspaper, which doesn't have a royal charter, but will nevertheless surely reach its customers.

VI

Mr. Salomonsen was a landlord and once in a while lent money. With appropriate security. He was sitting in his nice chair in his nice drawing room calmly listening to Lundegaard's explanations. Actually, he didn't go in for that kind of business, didn't care for it—it was so easily misunderstood; besides, what security did he have that he'd get his money back. He'd done people favors of that kind before and many times had gotten ingratitude and bother in return.

Lundegaard turned ardent and earnest.

Mr. Salomonsen meant what he said. What security did he have that he'd get his money back. What was unreasonable about charging a profit in proportion to the risk he was running. If people sought his help and did it so often, it was because there was need for it. Mr. Salomonsen knew and loved the parable of the unfaithful servant. Mr. Salomonsen was a good Christian. Mr. Salomonsen was a useful citizen. It was the bankers who looked askance at his business activities, and the bankers had influence with the press. Mr. Salomonsen had once been a little boy who'd played in the Søndermark and gotten a beating from the other boys because he was weaker than they were and didn't know how to stand up for himself. Now it might happen that one of these boys came to him. Back then little Salomonsen had said the Lord's Prayer every evening, and even though he no longer did, he was of the opinion that it could never hurt. On the eve of major church festivals Mr. Salomonsen went to church with his wife, who'd previously been his housekeeper.

Of course he had to have security for his money. Lundegaard had believed that the guarantee would do it. Besides, after all he had a good job. It was only a momentary embarrassment. Besides, he could have security in the furniture, which had cost a lot of money.

Mr. Salomonsen looked at his watch. It was his custom to go to the billiard parlor every afternoon and play a game with one or another of his good friends. And afterward maybe a game of poker in the back room. It was an enjoyable game. And he

played cautiously.

Lundegaard took pains to find several items that might give Mr. Salomonsen the security he desired. The sole item of fixed cash in their poor life was Anna's salary. Pledging her salary as security. She'd never go along with that, Anna wouldn't. Maybe he could get a loan at a bank, after all, if his brother and brother-in-law co-signed. After all, they'd already co-signed once. He remembered their expressions, their noble indignation about his having misused kinship in that way. He wouldn't ask them a second time. He had to have that loan from Mr. Salomonsen and then get rid of it as quickly as possible. The 200 crowns that could put a stop to all his troubles were sitting in Mr. Salomonsen's wallet, right there inside his vest. They might wander over into his wallet and put an end to his worries. He had of course spent some of the money he'd collected.

Mr. Salomonsen thought over the words Pledging Her Salary as Security carefully, and then sat down over at the desk and drew up several documents.

On the way home Lundegaard went into the main train station and put Anna's name on one of them—after all, she'd never find out about it anyway.

VII

Whenever you talked to people, they all said: War's coming—it might take a short time or a long time, but it's certain it'll end in war. But at bottom some of them nourished a mystic belief that it wouldn't come to that after all. In any event, they weren't preparing themselves for it to come.

There were groups that desired war. Depressed unemployed people; people who were in difficulties up to their ears, insuperable difficulties, and kept themselves going only by this consideration: No matter how things otherwise turn out, the sun of course still rises every morning and sets every evening; people who feared that the embezzlement they'd committed would be uncovered before long; little people for whom the difficulties

grew from day to day and who sometimes considered suicide as the only solution—and then of course the speculators.

It was during these days that a well-known editor of a paper in Copenhagen wrote that a quick little war would have a refreshing effect, create business, production, work for idle hands, earnings. There was a man on the trolley who said: If we were just certain of being kept out like during the world war, let it come. The sooner the better. Do you remember Copenhagen in 1915-16—life was worth living then. And he hummed a snippet of a tune from back then: Then we'll go boozing the whole night through. — He was a well-dressed man, a good-looking man with a trustworthy appearance and friendly eyes.

There were people who hated and feared war and who saw preparations for war everywhere. When a bridge was to be built, a road constructed, when air shows, military displays, were arranged on Sundays so the soldier-boys' families could see how capable they were and how splendidly they were doing. There were pacifists who said you should conscientiously object to serving as a soldier, and people from the labor movement who said you should turn the weapons the other way.

The conversations around Lundegaard at this time were about war, which was approaching. At the office, at pubs where he drank a beer to warm up, with chance acquaintances he ran into. At home they never talked about that kind of thing. Of course, there was so much in the newspapers about rearmament everywhere. The news dealer on the corner, who was a communist, said that when the steamship company stocks rose, war would come. The stock manipulators were in the know—there was money to be made on a war. Of course, you had other things to look after than watching the quotations for steamship company stocks. Lundegaard felt it was almost like something that didn't concern him. Now he could get the money and get the worst troubles off his hands.

It'd become fashionable to talk about the coming war in the same way you talked about the weather, about accidents and about the six-day race. You fired off the set comments. You followed the time-honored rules, delivered the clever, banal

views about the day's current events, which no one contradicted. You never talked honestly, independently, because you had no opinion. Why should you trouble yourself with it—after all, you could get it from the editorials in the newspapers. The conversations were by and large an exchange of clever, prescribed comments. If it was a train accident: Terrible. The poor surviving family. If it was a corruption scandal: Incredible that people with a fixed, generous income behave that way. You might hope that they'd get a proper punishment. But they'll probably be let off with a fine or be let out the prison back door. If it'd been a poor man who'd stolen firewood, it surely would've been different. If it was war: It's certain there's a new war coming. As long as there are two people on earth, there'll be war.

It was almost as if everybody went around masking his real thoughts, his own little private existence, behind this shield of set comments. When all's said and done, people didn't know much about one another. They lived side by side day in and day out without actually knowing one another. It was probably actually an advantage of these conventional comments that you never gave yourself away. There was nobody who knew that Mrs. Lundegaard paid the collection to the Nazarenes with her meager household allowance, nobody who knew that Lundegaard was a regular customer of the girl in the mauve outfit, who always, in any case after nightfall, stood on the corner of Vesterbro Street, who knew that Poul went about with plans to move away from home and force his way into living life, if need be, with methods that by law are assessed with prison.

And people didn't know that every morning when Anna rode to the department store, she gave away her lunch pack to the old woman who sat by the church, and that she bought a nicely piled-up open-faced sandwich in a store, a sandwich that could stand up to her work mates' scrutiny. In general, people knew very little about Anna. She always behaved friendly to her parents, but never said anything about herself. She rode off in the morning, came home for dinner, and disappeared again. She slept in the dining room, Poul slept in the kitchen; there was never anybody who noticed when she came home.